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Battered Libertarians look for new direction in desert

By Glenn Garvin
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PHOENIX, Ariz. — The Libertarian Party — once the fastest growing political party in America — gathered here in the desert yesterday to lick its wounds and ponder the future.

Some party members even found grimly humorous significance in that their convention was scheduled in Phoenix, which during August resembles nothing so much as the interior of a blast furnace.

"We like to put ourselves through all kinds of torture tests," said Stephen Davis, a consultant from Gramlin, S.C. "That's how we can tell if we'll be around for the future."

The results of the 1984 presidential election left a lot of people — including a large number of Libertarians — wondering if the party would be around much longer. After nearly doubling their vote totals in each election between 1972 and 1980, Libertarians suffered a horrendous setback in 1984.

Libertarian presidential candidate David Bergland, a California lawyer, got only 225,000 votes, a decline of 700,000 from 1980. And the party's organizational efforts were so poor that Mr. Bergland's name did not even appear on the ballot in 12 states, including Texas, Florida and Massachusetts.

"We took a tremendous beating in the last election," said Jim Lewis, the Connecticut businessman who was Mr. Bergland's running mate.

"There's just no other way to say it."

To make matters worse, the Libertarians are broke. Estimates of the party's debt run from \$60,000 to \$90,000 — tiny amounts, perhaps, to Republicans or Democrats, but a serious problem for a party that could only raise \$750,000 for its last presidential campaign.

The bleak outlook has cast a pall over this convention but the atmosphere at yesterday's platform com-

mittee sessions was calm.

Committee members beat back attempts by conservatives to amend the platform — which generally calls for the abolition of nearly all government — in a rightward direction.

Amendments that would have softened the party's pro-abortion stance and explicitly endorsed the CIA as an intelligence-gathering agency were soundly defeated.

A series of proposals on defense policy from both the party's left and right wings were on the agenda for consideration, including one that would have called for unilateral destruction of America's nuclear arsenal, and another that would call for construction of a "star wars" anti-missile system.

The conflict between left- and right-wing Libertarians over defense dates back to the party's founding in 1971. It will probably continue here until the convention ends Sunday, but seems to lack much of its old rancor.

"Part of that is there's no question the party is a more conservative place than it was in the early '70s," said Bill Evers, the Stanford doctoral candidate who managed Mr. Bergland's campaign.

But part of it is that most of the Libertarians at this 11th convention are more worried about political strategy than defense strategy.

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